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USSR-France: The Gorbachev-Mitterrand Meeting

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Summary

Both President Mitterrand and General Secretary Gorbachev appear to have modest expectations for their early October meeting. Soviet probing could test apparent French resolve to avoid statements critical of US positions, but Gorbachev's unprecedented exposure to a skeptical and aggressive French press invites tough questioning that could deny him the media success he seeks.

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Gorbachev probably sees his 2-5 October visit to France primarily as an opportunity to portray himself as a flexible statesman interested in greater cooperation with Western Europe. Beyond that, recent Soviet media commentary [redacted] suggested that he is likely to concentrate on gaining some French support for Soviet views on European security issues and the alleged dangers of the US Strategic Defense Initiative.

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Mitterrand, too, will be concentrating on his image. He is on the defensive at home, where his party faces the prospects of heavy losses in legislative elections next spring, and he would like a visible success to distract media attention from French responsibility for bombing the Greenpeace flagship this summer. He is almost certainly looking for a meeting that will allow him to demonstrate firmness toward Moscow without kowtowing to Washington and to show that France has an important role to play in renewing the Western dialogue with the Kremlin.

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This paper was prepared by [redacted] of the Office of European Analysis and [redacted] of the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, West European Division, EURA, [redacted] or to the Chief, Strategic Policy Division, SOVA, [redacted]

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Gorbachev and the Media

The Soviets apparently calculate Gorbachev will be able to use the media to foster an impression of Soviet commitment to detente and arms control, possibly generating West European pressure for US flexibility during the scheduled US-Soviet talks. A recent Soviet radiobroadcast devoted to the upcoming Gorbachev-Mitterrand meeting suggested that Paris could contribute to progress at the US-Soviet arms talks in Geneva.

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In his pursuit of maximum favorable impact on Western public opinion, Gorbachev is exposing himself to the French media. French officials have told their US counterparts that Gorbachev has agreed to two interviews with the French news media prior to his arrival in Paris as well as a joint news conference scheduled for 4 October. The latter could be particularly risky because -- as US officials and others have suggested -- Gorbachev's staunch defense of Soviet positions and penchant for political repartee sometimes convey an impression of arrogance. If challenged by his French hosts on such issues as human rights or SS-20 deployments, he thus might adopt a combative posture that would undermine his presumed objective of accentuating common Franco-Soviet perspectives.

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The French media, like Mitterrand, are on guard after Gorbachev's publicity success in Britain last December, and they will be out to prove that they cannot be hoodwinked by his vaunted talents for manipulating the press. French magazines and newspapers already are discounting the Gorbachev style and emphasizing the lack of real change in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the French media's attention to Soviet human rights abuses will almost certainly force Gorbachev to field tough questions on Poland, Afghanistan, Sakharov, and Frenchmen detained in the Soviet Union.

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Strategic Arms

Gorbachev probably hopes to capitalize on well-publicized French fears that an arms race in space would neutralize the strategic utility of French nuclear forces. He may calculate that French anxiety can be translated into open support for a US-Soviet accord on space weapons and for the preservation of the current US-Soviet ABM treaty. The Soviets are probably realistic enough, however, not to expect explicit French opposition to SDI.

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Mitterrand may join Gorbachev in condemning the "militarization of space," but we believe the French President

would carefully balance any criticism of SDI by reiterating French condemnations of Soviet space weapons research -- which French officials consider to be at least as far advanced as US research. Mitterrand personally assured the US Ambassador that Soviet efforts to exploit US-French differences over SDI would be futile. US officials in Paris report, moreover, that the French are wary of being drawn into unqualified opposition to SDI that would undermine the US position at Geneva and make their own summit appear to jeopardize prospects for detente. To date, Paris has made a clear distinction between criticizing SDI in Western forums -- where criticism is "in the family" -- and making such statements during meetings with Soviet officials.

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Gorbachev is likely to stress Moscow's willingness to undertake substantial reductions in offensive strategic nuclear forces if the US should forgo SDI development. He is likely to avoid detailed discussion of INF issues but may say that Moscow's unilateral moratorium on new INF deployments is contingent on future NATO actions, hoping to influence the November Dutch decision and other future NATO decisions on INF deployments.

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Despite French skepticism, Mitterrand almost certainly would applaud any detailed proposal for significant reductions in strategic or intermediate-range nuclear forces as a step in the right direction -- one well worth following up at the US-Soviet negotiations in Geneva or in the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting in November. He would word his response carefully to avoid giving the impression of jumping on the Soviet bandwagon, but he might urge Washington to take such a proposal seriously in the interest of world peace. Any Soviet proposal that could be interpreted as embracing French nuclear forces before massive reductions had been completed by the US and the USSR, however, would get short shrift in France.

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Because the French are fundamentally hostile to aspects of the US concept of SDI, it is possible Mitterrand could be tempted to endorse a US-Soviet tradeoff involving deep cuts in Soviet offensive weapons for severe restrictions on SDI research. In past dealings with Soviet officials, however, the French have rejected Soviet efforts to establish such linkage. Paris has in fact consistently refused to link any of the three negotiating categories defined by mutual US-Soviet agreement, and French officials have been especially firm in opposing Soviet attempts to establish a connection between SDI and intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe.

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EUREKA

The Soviet leader may offer qualified support for Mitterrand's proposed EUREKA project on European technical cooperation, but Gorbachev is likely to emphasize his support for EUREKA's development of non-military technologies. Although Mitterrand would welcome a Soviet endorsement of EUREKA, he would be suspicious if Moscow reversed field on its previous criticism of EUREKA and would reemphasize that the program is strictly a Western initiative; if necessary Mitterrand would spell out that there is no room for East European participation.

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Other Foreign Policy Issues

French officials have told their US counterparts that Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze noted Gorbachev's interest in discussing some of the issues currently deadlocking the Conference on Disarmament in Europe (CDE). He is also likely to seek French statements of concern about the volatility of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the situation in Central America. Given the tightrope he has to walk between Moscow and Washington, Mitterrand probably will relegate Soviet recommendations for breaking the CDE deadlock to working-level groups of experts. Despite his suspicions of Soviet motives, Mitterrand may reiterate well-known French positions on the need for all-party negotiations to resolve the conflicts in the Middle East and Central America.

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[redacted] the Soviets want formal links between CEMA and the EC, and he may raise this issue in Paris as another sign of his desire to expand Soviet-West European cooperation. Any Soviet move, however, is likely to be conditioned by Moscow's longstanding misgivings about actions that could boost West European cohesion or coordination. Paris probably is unprepared to offer any significant initiative to advance negotiations between the two communities.

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Bilateral Issues

US Embassy sources in Paris report that agreements on terms for French export credits to the USSR and on French agricultural or industrial sales to Moscow may be signed. The Soviets will probably also express sympathy with French concern about the USSR's trade surplus with France. Paris almost certainly will welcome any agreements but has learned through experience that Soviet commercial agreements are often not what they seem to be.

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